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SUBJECT: AZNAR DOMINATES POPULAR PARTY CONGRESS

Classified By: Political Counselor Kathy Fitzpatrick; reason 1.5 (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. Mariano Rajoy, a long-time Aznar ally and the Popular Party's presidential candidate in the March 14 elections, was elected as the new President of the Popular Party (PP) during the 15th PP Party Congress. The event was dominated by enthusiastic expressions of support for former President Jose Maria Aznar and attacks on the "inconsistency" of the ruling Socialist administration. Madrid Mayor Gallardon, the PP's most visible advocate of a tilt towards the political center and the most popular PP politician among the general electorate, stated flatly that the PP "must have done something wrong" to lose the March 14 elections. Rajoy was more cautious, saying the PP would "look to the future, not the past" and would seek "greater dialogue" with the electorate. Both Gallardon and Rajoy were overshadowed by Aznar, who, in a fiery speech near the close of the Congress, proclaimed that he had no regrets regarding the actions of his administration and called on the PP to remain true to its fundamental principles. The election of Angel Acebes - the public face of the Aznar administration's controversial handling of the March 11 terrorist attacks - as PP Secretary General indicates that there will be no revamping of the PP leadership in order to erase voter memories of that episode. Aznar moved into the largely ceremonial role of Honorary PP President, but his powerful appeal to the PP base will complicate both Rajoy's gentle shift towards the center and Gallardon's more ambitious aspirations. End Summary.

//PP CHANGES ITS COLORS, BUT NOT ITS MESSAGE//

¶2. (C) Poloff joined other diplomats in attending the 10/3 closing ceremony of the 15th PP Party Congress. The most tangible sign of change in the party was the adoption of new colors, dropping its staid, conservative blue banners in favor of a brilliant orange. Color changes aside, most political analysts predicted the Congress would feature a showdown between advocates of moving the PP towards the political center and party stalwarts who oppose any watering down of traditional PP principles, such as the party plank affirming Christianity as a guiding element. In the end, however, there was only a cautious airing of differences, as most speakers lambasted the ruling Socialist (PSOE) government and reaffirmed their support for traditional PP positions. Key indicators of continuity included the selection of Angel Acebes as PP Secretary General -- despite his unpopular role as Minister of the Interior at the time of the 3/11 train bombings -- and the reelection of most members of the PP's National Executive Committee.

//CALLS FOR INTROSPECTION AND CHANGE//

¶3. (C) Charismatic Madrid Mayor Alberto Ruiz Gallardon, who is very popular with non-PP voters but is distrusted by the more conservative PP rank-and-file, broke the trend and made veiled criticisms of the Aznar administration during his speech. (Gallardon was seated with second-tier PP leaders and spoke on the second day of the convention rather than in the all-important closing ceremony on day three.) Gallardon praised the successes of the Aznar years, but said the PP should recognize that it "must have done something wrong" to lose the March 14 elections. He suggested the PP should review its positions on social issues, such as the inclusion of Christianity in the PP platform and the party's opposition to adoptions by homosexual couples, to determine whether such positions alienated potential supporters. PSOE, bucking the Spanish Catholic Church, favors legalizing homosexual marriage and giving homosexual couples adoption rights, moves apparently popular with the Spanish public. Gallardon said that in the future the PP would have to adjust to new social realities and "increase its presence in the streets." The crowd applauded politely, but Gallardon's comments received no more than a tepid response.

//AZNAR EXPRESSES NO REGRETS: "WE'RE RIGHT AND PSOE IS WRONG"//

¶4. (SBU) Aznar, by contrast, was greeted as a conquering hero by the enthusiastic crowd and was introduced as the "moral point of reference" of the PP. Prior to his entry, a video reviewed the highlights of the Aznar era and his stewardship of the party during its most successful period. Relaxed and confident, Aznar began by congratulating the Spanish security forces for the landmark capture of ETA leaders earlier in the day in a joint operation with the French government. He recounted the many PP victims of ETA terrorism (the crowd

roared with approval during a video clip of Aznar walking away from a failed ETA assassination attempt) and said the GOS "can never stop fighting terrorism."

15. (SBU) After announcing his unequivocal support for Rajoy, Aznar recited the achievements of his administration and launched broadside after broadside at his PSOE critics. He said the PP should not fear being in opposition to Zapatero, alone if necessary, as long as the party remained "coherent and consistent." Aznar insisted that the PP's primary responsibility was to the 10 million voters who had backed the party in its worst moments because the PP was the only party that reflected their convictions. The PP left Spain "solvent, without a deficit, and with fewer terrorists on the streets and none in the institutions of government" (an allusion to PSOE involvement in a dirty war against ETA during the Felipe Gonzalez era.)

16. (SBU) In another swipe at alleged PSOE corruption under Gonzalez, Aznar said his administration would be remembered as "the government that didn't steal." He echoed earlier PP speakers in claiming that President Zapatero's sole agenda thus far was to roll back PP measures and irresponsibly increase spending. Aznar noted that, unlike Zapatero, he didn't "settle scores" with PSOE when he took office in 1996, "even though there were many opportunities to do so." He contrasted Zapatero's pursuit of "false" social gains with the "genuine" economic improvements brought about during his administration. Aznar accused Zapatero of reopening old wounds, especially by renewing discussion of constitutional reforms, opening the possibility of greater devolution of power to the regions (anathema to the PP). Closing to rousing applause, Aznar said the PP had a "patriotic responsibility" to oppose PSOE's policies. "We are right and PSOE is demonstrating that it is wrong...We should never be ashamed of the way we governed or we will never be capable of returning to government."

//RAJOY STEERS A MIDDLE COURSE//

17. (SBU) After a rather less stirring video on Rajoy's political history, the new PP President took the stand to reel the crowd back in and focus on his project for the future of the party. He began by going over the fundamental planks of the party platform, which he said underpinned the PP's vision of a Spain that is "solvent, free, and unified." Though it took some time to capture the enthusiasm of the attendees, Rajoy pulled them in with a humorous review of the early missteps of the Zapatero administration. He criticized Socialist "sectarianism" and Zapatero's reliance on regional leaders intent on gaining greater powers from Madrid. Rajoy agreed that the PP had a proud record, but said he would not dwell on the past and would instead focus on the future, including a commitment to the political center. He extended an olive branch to PSOE on foreign policy, saying that, like terrorism, the two parties should agree on core strategic interests so that Spain would be seen as a "serious country" by the international community rather than veering from alliance to alliance depending on which party was in power. A PSOE representative expressed interest in the offer on 10/4.

//TERRORISM A CENTRAL THEME//

18. (SBU) The PP's fight against terrorism was a core issue throughout the convention, especially during Aznar's speech. "We did the right thing when we decided to jump in up to our necks in the fight against terrorism alongside our friends and allies," proclaimed Aznar. Aznar scorned an editorial writer who recently compared him to Osama bin Laden, saying he was untroubled by that comparison, nor by the accusation by another writer that he bore responsibility for the 200 deaths in the March 11 train bombings. "That man should ask himself how many bodies his friends (PSOE) are responsible for," again alluding to PSOE's involvement in the extrajudicial killings of ETA activists during the Gonzalez administration. "We can say with our heads held high that our hands are clean and that we never had to bury any cadavers in quicklime during our time in power." Aznar said the right way to deal with terrorists was to attack them directly through legal means.

19. (SBU) Rajoy also attacked PSOE's "manipulation" of the 3/11 train bombings, but emphasized the importance of the PP-PSOE joint position against terrorism and called on other parties to join the pact "without attempting to weaken it." He congratulated Minister Interior Alonso for the major ETA arrests and expressed his continued willingness to work with all parties against threats to national security.

//COMMENT//

110. (C) Rajoy may have been the official winner of the PP Presidency, but the Congress was Aznar's show. It is clear that Aznar continues to command the support of the PP rank-and-file and that Rajoy will have to step gingerly if he

is to successfully move the party towards the political center. For now, Rajoy is focused on honing the PP's message as the main opposition party and consolidating his personal leadership of the party machinery. Meanwhile, Gallardon, for all his popularity among non-PP voters and attractiveness as a candidate, remains on the margins of party leadership. He has not convinced PP loyalists that regaining power is worth compromising ideological positions that many view as the core strength of the party. The PP Party Congress did not strengthen Gallardon's position.

ARGYROS